

Grade Anxiety

and other Hobgoblins of the Mind

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- A. **What is grade anxiety?**
- B. **Does grade anxiety help or hinder your success?**
- C. **Do grades really matter anyway?**
- D. **What can you do about grade anxiety?**

A. What is grade anxiety?

Simply put, *grade anxiety* describes feelings of nervousness, uneasiness, and great concern regarding measures of academic performance. It manifests itself as an obsessive concern for one's grades and grade point average (GPA). Symptoms include:

- Physical stress symptoms (increased heart rate, sweating, loss of appetite / knots in stomach, muscle tension).
- Cognitive symptoms (inability to concentrate or focus on work, worry, ruminations -- constant thoughts of performance, evaluation, and grades).

Rumination is a process where you think about the same thing over and over again. If you find yourself thinking about your grades to an unusual degree -- then you are ruminating about them. It is important to realize that rumination is not the same thing as focus. Being focused on ones' academic goals can be a healthy and effective way to stay academically successful. When thoughts become counterproductive and repetitive, they fall into the realm of being obsessive and begin to hurt your academic success. As in most things in life, a healthy balance is optimal.

B. Does grade anxiety help or hinder your success?

Some of the effects of grade anxiety are:

- Loss of pleasure of learning. When the focus becomes on the outcome of grades, the process of learning loses its joy.
- Less efficient cognitive functioning. Anxiety reduces your ability to concentrate. If you are obsessed with your performance, you have fewer cognitive resources to allocate to legitimate studying.
- Physical and psychological stress. Prolonged anxiety can lead to stress . Stress produces biochemical changes which increase cortisol and adrenaline levels in your blood. Over time, this can cause physical damage like ulcers, headaches, high blood pressure, digestive problems, and depression.
- Inferior education. Some people are so anxious over grades that they intentionally register for easier courses. This GPA driven registration strategy defeats the purpose of undergraduate education. By focusing on easy classes, a student using this strategy misses out on topics that they might find inherently interesting and fulfilling.

Something to think about:

Is grade motivated learning the same as learning in order to have competency in a subject area? Many people would argue that the answer is no. Grade motivated learning takes advantage of the fact that exams tend to be narrow in their focus and format. Students know this and study accordingly by ignoring material that they suspect won't be tested. Additionally, students tend to

learn material only to the depth at which they will be tested. This type of learning can be very limiting. If you came to the University to be educated and to learn as much as you can, then focusing on grades can actually diminish the amount you learn! Focusing instead on depth of knowledge, competency in a subject area, and being able to apply what you've learned to the real world can increase the amount you learn.

C. Do grades really matter anyway?

As is so often the case, the answer to the question "Do grades really matter?" is "It depends". There are a number of factors to consider when setting academic goals for yourself. Some questions to ask yourself include:

Do I plan to go to graduate school someday?

Do any of the majors I plan to declare require a minimum GPA?

Do I have plans to change colleges, or apply to the Haas School of Business?

Does any of my financial aid depend upon meeting a minimum GPA requirement?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then GPA does matter - to a degree. It is important to be realistic about what is required of you in each of these situations. For example, admission to graduate school does NOT require a 4.0 (grad schools look for GPA above 3.0). Find out in advance what GPA minimums your desired major requires -- that way you don't have to stress about having a less than perfect GPA.

If you answered NO to all four questions, then GPA still matters, but to a lesser degree. (Of course, all students need to maintain a minimum of 2.0 to remain in good academic standing.) You should be mindful of the fact that employers sometimes (but not always) ask about your GPA when you go for your first job after graduating.

Something to think about:

After you secure your first job, it is very unlikely that anyone will ever ask you about your GPA again. It will become an obsolete and useless statistic about you. Also, many students report that recruiters don't ask about GPA at all. Employers often care more about your communication skills and the fact that you got a degree from UC Berkeley than about your grades. Many employers now pay more attention to your writing sample and interview performance than your GPA.

Also, keep in mind that employers and graduate schools are keenly aware of UC Berkeley's academic reputation. They know that Cal is academically rigorous and that grades are earned rather than handed out. They know that the transcripts of Cal students are not comparable to other schools that are known for easier grading (like a well known rival located near Palo Alto). Employers tell us that they value Cal graduates highly regardless of GPA -- they find the degree itself valuable.

D. What can you do about grade anxiety?

If grade anxiety is getting the better of you, there are a number of things you can do about it.

- Reevaluate your goals for being here at Cal. If you are here to learn all you can and to gain some competency in a number of areas, then stay focused on that instead of grades. Remind yourself that grades are an imperfect indicator of how much you have learned. Set goals that focus on the breadth and depth of knowledge you hope to acquire. Look for ways to apply what you have learned to the real world through internships, volunteer work, and practicums.

- Be realistic about your GPA goals. Earning a 4.0 all four years is a very rare thing.
- Research your intended major, graduate school plans, or career options. Find out what GPA requirements you will need to meet. By doing this, you may be able to take some of the pressure off of yourself by learning what range your GPA needs to fall into in order for you to meet your goals.
- Talk to a counseling psychologist at the Tang Health Services building. The counselors at University Health Services are trained to help you reduce your anxiousness and to improve your academic focus and performance. You can call them at 642-9494 to make an appointment.
- Talk to an academic advisor at your college or in your residence hall.